

Julian Bream (1933-2020): Pioneer of the classical guitar

By Paul Bond
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The guitarist Julian Bream's performances were only part of his legacy. He played a major part in establishing the guitar as a recognised classical instrument in Britain and beyond, working actively to develop and define its sound. Raising the instrument's profile involved an exciting expansion of its repertoire, and Bream was also central to arousing popular interest in Renaissance lute music.

Bream was born in 1933 in Battersea, south London. The guitar, at that time, had little status as a classical instrument in Britain—the previous significant player, Ernest Shand (1868-1924), was a prolific composer and performer, but primarily earned his living as a music hall actor.

Bream's development reflected that earlier neglect, but it also shows the disciplined determination the young player brought to the instrument.

Self-tuition can be a breeding ground for bad habits, yet Bream worked diligently on his technique. He later said he was “mostly self-taught on guitar and that had its benefits. It's a great thing to work through problems on your own.”

His first introduction to the instrument came from his father Henry, a commercial artist who also played plectrum guitar in local dance bands. Henry one day found Julian strumming his guitar and decided to teach him to play. Henry was seemingly an accomplished jazz guitarist, and Julian adored the playing of jazz maestro Django Reinhardt.

A turning point for Bream was hearing recordings done by Andrés Segovia (1893-1987), another great guitarist, whose transcriptions of Baroque compositions helped shape the modern repertoire. Segovia also led the way in developing and standardising modern playing techniques.

Recognising Julian's interests, Henry bought him a “finger-style” (classical) guitar for his 11th birthday. He began working through tuition books with him but thought Julian's musical future lay with the piano. That year, Julian won a junior exhibition award to study piano at the Royal College of Music (RCM), with the cello as his second instrument.

Bream denied being any child prodigy, but the gifted youngster was a quick learner. A year after Julian began

playing classical guitar, Henry took him to a meeting of the Philharmonic Society of Guitarists (PSG). Their meetings ended with members playing pieces they were studying. When the principal, Boris Perott, invited the youngest person there to play, Julian surprised and impressed everybody—including Henry—with his rendition of Fernando Sor's *Study in B minor*. When Henry explained they were working from tuition books, Perott offered to teach Julian.

Bream said Perott's lessons were “of cursory value and didn't do any harm, but I had to unlearn the right-hand technique he taught me.” He later saw their importance chiefly as giving “some measure of discipline at a time when I needed it.”

Perott's methods were seen as outdated within the PSG. Another PSG member, Wilfred Appleby, steered Bream towards techniques championed by Fernando Tárrega (1852-1909). Even here, however, the youngster was left to “a handful of Tárrega-based instruction manuals and a large dose of self-education.” As arguments between his would-be mentors raged around him, Bream focused intently on making his own decisions.

Perott continued to be supportive, although his promised recitals never materialised. Bream was, however, invited to perform for Segovia at a PSG reception in London in 1947. Segovia was impressed, and offered to teach Bream, an offer later withdrawn for reasons that are unclear.

Bream was already beginning to make his own way. He had made his professional debut at Cheltenham, aged 13, and was a seasoned recitalist when he won a full scholarship to the RCM in 1948. The guitar was still not available as a principal study, so he enrolled for piano and cello.

The Breams's domestic situation was fraught. His parents had divorced, with Henry winning custody of Julian and his sister, but his business faced bankruptcy. Disaster was averted by financial support from the Artists' Benevolent Fund, and Julian's London debut was a 1950 benefit concert one week before Henry's death.

Julian also brought to the RCM another marginal interest—on the concert stage, at least. In 1947 Henry bought

a lute from a sailor in London, which Julian repaired and learned to play.

In 1950, he found a volume of lute solos by the great Renaissance lutenist John Dowland (1562/3-1626) in transcriptions by Peter Warlock (1894-1930). Struck by their beauty, he initially transcribed them for the guitar before throwing himself fully into the lute.

Dowland's music was not unknown, but it was largely confined to a rarefied and academic lute world. This world grumbled about Bream's "inauthentic" technique, but Bream brought the music to a much wider audience, particularly through his ensemble, the Julian Bream Consort. For this alone we would owe him an enormous debt.

In November 1951, Bream launched his career with a debut recital at London's Wigmore Hall. International success followed. Bream quickly became the figurehead of an established classical guitar repertoire, including relatively recent compositions like Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, as well as the pioneer of a whole new repertoire.

Meeting Peter Pears led to a two-decade collaboration on lute songs, and a close friendship and collaboration with Pears's partner, the composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). Bream and Pears debuted Britten's *Songs from the Chinese* in 1957, and in 1964 Bream premiered Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland* (1963). This was based on Dowland's *Come, Heavy Sleep*, long a staple of Pears and Bream's recital programme.

The *Nocturnal*, thanks to Bream's performance, soon established itself as one of the most important contemporary compositions for the guitar. Bream said its technical complexities were "very nearly beyond me."

His performance not only established the *Nocturnal* in the contemporary repertoire, it also encouraged other composers. Bream transformed the repertoire with new compositions by Malcolm Arnold, Lennox Berkeley, Hans Werner Henze, Toru Takemitsu, Michael Tippett and many others. He did more for the guitar repertoire than any other player of his generation.

He also consolidated some already established composers for the instrument. In 1957, for example, he gave the first European performance of the concerto by Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959).

His continued technical refinement never ceased. In 1959, he again reworked his technique, saying his continued attention was "a legacy of being largely self-taught." Even after he stopped playing, he said he had become "much more critical...of phrasing and tempo and general musical interpretation."

Such scrutiny was not confined to his playing but extended to the instrument itself. In 1965, Bream asked luthier David Rubio to make "a guitar that will do what I want it to, not

one that tells me what I may do." The predominant sound at the time, based on Spanish models, has been described as a quick-fading "candle-flame" treble and a "fruit-salad" bass, giving an overpoweringly bass-heavy emotional effect. In its place, Rubio developed "the English sound" of clarity and balance, better suited to the new repertoire. It was all part of integrating the guitar and its new compositions into the classical world.

Clarity sums up Bream's approach to music. He recorded extensively, mainly for RCA (1959-1990), but stopped in the 1990s as he had "recorded everything I want to record." The recordings cover some impressive material. He won four Grammy Awards, and was nominated 20 times.

By the 1980s, Bream had already accomplished the establishment of the guitar's place in classical music with a huge expansion of its repertoire, and the wider popularisation of Renaissance lute music, but he continued to perform devotedly. In 1984, he shattered his right elbow in an accident, but with reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation he was touring again three months later. He only finally quit public performance in 2002, although he was still playing informally until 2011, when he broke both hips and injured his left hand in a fall.

He said then there was "nothing sad about not playing any more," but that he was "annoyed...that I know I'm a better musician than I was at 70, but I can't prove it." He continued to play scales and arpeggios just to keep brain and muscles "ticking over."

His summary of his life's work bears repeating: "I devoted my life to music for a reason, and the reason wasn't because I wanted to get on or make money, but to try to fulfil myself and also to give people pleasure. That's been my credo."

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